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My Lady Isobel

Mabel Dibble Taylor

(Taylor.)
NBI

MY LADY ISOBEL—A TALE

MY LADY ISOBEL

A TALE

BY

MABEL DIBBLE TAYLOR

NEW YORK
G. W. DILLINGHAM CO.
1901

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My Lady Isobel

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I dedicate this little book to my Mother—and to her Memory, which is the most sacred of my possessions and an inspiration toward all that is good and beautiful.

MABEL DIBBLE TAYLOR.

"For some we loved, the loveliest and the best,
That from his Vintage rolling Time has prest,
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,
And one by one crept silently to rest."

From the Rubáiyat of Omar Khayyám.

MY LADY ISOBEL—A TALE

Part One

MY LADY ISOBEL—A TALE

Part One

WITCH ISOBEL

RAY stood the castle, gray and gaunt and grand,
Holding its turrets proudly in the air,
Its lordly towers and its minarets;
While sullen lay the moat, its sluggish breast
Scarce stirring to the whisper of the breeze
Which stole among the thickly wooded hills
To lull the tree tops with its voice of love.
It was the budding season of the Spring
When baby leaves unfold, and all is fair
With promises of happiness and love!
And all about the castle gray, there stretched
A mantle of the varied shades of green—
The tender shades that come to life in Spring

My Lady Isobel

And at no other season of the year—
Sweet, tender shades, like hopes of things to be.
The air was full of odors wondrous sweet
That sent the blood to thrilling through the veins
And made the Lady Isobel alive
To all the joys of life on such a day.
So throwing wide her casement, forth she leaned,
A lovely picture framed by clinging vines
And tendrils of the ivy growing close
About her chamber window all the year.
The Lady Isobel was passing fair,
A wee slip of a girl, with gracious mien,
And yet a certain stateliness withal;
A trick, perchance, of carrying the head
Above the whiteness of the slender throat.
A something that possessed a nameless charm
And gave the slender figure dignity.
So fair and frail and colorless her face,
Framed in the masses of her dusky hair,
That like to some white passion flower it seemed
Set in the darkness of a starless night.
At times her eyes seemed seeing things beyond;

But let a person tell a merry tale
To call her from the sadness of her mood,
And straight they filled with sparks of merriment.
She could be proud and winning, sad and sweet,
And all these changes as you drew a breath,
So that the Earl, her father, gray and grim,
Like to his castle, called her fondly "Witch,"
"Witch Isobel," the darling of his heart.
But to the humble folk she was a queen,
Who cheered the lonely, comforted the sad,
Bettered the ill, gave money to the poor,
And helped the needy in a thousand ways;
So that whenever any said her name
The humble cap was doffed, and bent the knee.
With all her goodness, she was innocent,
As innocent of evil and the world
As some pale nun within the convent walls.
For Isobel, her father guarded close
As something far too precious for the court,
The tourney, or the eyes of courtly men
Who carried lusting hearts beneath their cloaks.
So never from the castle had she gone

My Lady Isobel

Except among her maids into the wood,
To hide amid the trees with merry cries
And shouts of maiden laughter passing sweet,
Or down among the poor and humble folk.
And when her father sheltered knightly guests
She came not in among them; for the Earl,
Losing his wife when Isobel was born,
Cherished his all with far too watchful eye.
And, guarding her from danger, paved the way
To greater danger through her innocence.
He thought of her as but a little maid.
So when her eighteenth birthday came around,
And she appeared before him with her hair
Coiled high in masses on her shapely head,
And, smiling, told him, " I'm a woman now,
And child no longer;" then he looked amazed
And saw, alas, that she had spoken true.
So, with a heavy heart he bid her grace
From that day forth the board as hostess, and
Promised her sadly that she soon should go
With him unto the tourney. Cautioned her
Against the wiles which would be brought to bear

Upon her beauty and her innocence;
Told her, in short, no longer guarded close,
She might begin her combat with the world.
She listened, yet, alas, she did not heed,
Deeming he only spoke to frighten her,
And that all men were good and brave and true.
For all the books that she had read of love
Were of great knights and lovely ladies, while
Her maidens dared not tell an evil tale
Where she might hear it, for she was so pure.
So that she deemed the world most beautiful,
And marvelled idly at her father's words;
Marvelled, and then forgot them mid her dreams—
Vague, misty dreams, withal most wonderful,
Of some one who should love her passing well,
Holding her high as some bright star in Heav'n,
Risking and daring all for love's sweet sake.
So on this morning, when her natal day
Was two weeks gone and not a stranger come
Or guest whom she might welcome, gayly she
Threw open wide the casement, leaning out
To breathe the beauty of the budding world.

And as she looked she saw the drawbridge fall,
And there, beyond the moat, two strangers rode—
Two knightly strangers with a royal air.
She watched them with a quickly beating heart
The while they clattered loudly o'er the bridge
And made to pass her window, where she leaned
High up above them, watching eagerly.
One rode a mighty charger black as night,
With wide-expanded nostrils red as blood,
And proudly arching neck and flowing mane.
The rider wore a massive coat of mail,
His visor was uplifted, and she saw
A swarthy, stern set face, not handsome—nay,
Not handsome—yet it bore a noble look,
A look which lent a glamour to the face.
Perchance, it was the soul itself one saw,
And seeing it one trusted without fear.
He was a man whom little children loved,
And nothing finer can be said of him,
For children are the judges of the world,
And whom they trust are to be counted on.
Yet Isobel, who had a strange ideal

Of manly beauty, having clothed her knight
In silken vesture sprinkled o'er with jewels,
Decked him with laces, ribbons, and the like,
Given him ringlets long and jaunty air,
Painted him in her fancy with the airs,
Conceit, and graces of the world at court,
Made him in truth a lady's darling; while,
At the same time, she gave him manly strength
And all the attributes which make a knight,
Not knowing that such fair-faced gallants are
But seldom worthy of that noble name.
Yet Isobel, who had a strange ideal
Of manly beauty, saw in that dark face
Nothing to gaze at, so she dropped her eyes
Until they fell upon the other man;
And at the self-same instant up he glanced
And met her look. The Lady Isobel
Flushed, started back, and, as she did so, dropped
Her silken kerchief from her trembling hand,
Which, fluttering downward like a butterfly,
Flew straight to him who thus had caught her gaze,
And rested on his horse's snowy mane.

My Lady Isobel

The stranger raised the kerchief to his lips—
This Isobel, watching half frighted, saw—
And then glanced upward for a second time,
With such bold admiration in his eyes
That Isobel drew backward with a blush.
The stranger smiled and placed the silken thing
Next to his heart, beneath his jewels and lace.
His golden ringlets fluttered in the breeze;
The hand that held the bridle was as white
As any woman's, and the jewels he wore
Flashed out a thousand fires to the sun.
His eyes were blue and tender, and he owned
That jaunty grace, that bold and winning air
Few women can resist until they know
The nature of the man—and some *not then.*
His charger was as white as driven snow,
And far behind there came his little page,
A pretty stripling, slender as a girl,
Who had but lately entered in his pay,
But seemed to know his every wish and want.
The knight's good squire followed with the page;
He followed him for love, and love alone,

Witch Isobel

For Brian Guilleforde, knight and gentleman,
Had but his lance and strong right arm for wealth,
Being most poor in all save strength and friends.
Sir Wilfred Vaillard was the rage at court,
The petted darling of that brilliant world.
Unto the tourney both were journeying,
And they had met each other on the road,
And ridden side by side for company.
Nor had they met before, although each name
Was known to the other. Wilfred knew
The name of Brian Guilleforde; it was sung
Wherever there were songs of bravery.
Few knights could stand before him in the lists,
And he was champion of all oppressed,
And everywhere defended virtue well.
Brian did know the name of Vaillard; for
It stood for all most evil and most vile.
He was the gayest of the gay at court,
And led licentious pleasures with a vim
That placed him on a hill of infamy.
Yet women sighed and blushed before his name,

My Lady Isobel

Though some there were who sighed and blushed
no more,
But crept away with broken hearts to die
Like fragile flowers plucked and trampled on.
He was most rich and powerful, and held
The world was surely made for him alone.
When Brian therefore learned with whom he rode,
He fain would have gone onward by himself.
He bore a bitter feeling toward the man
Who rode so gayly by him. Vaillard guessed
And read the meaning of his darkening looks,
Laughed secretly, and likewise swore that since
His company was hardly wanted by
This champion of virtue, yet would he
Keep to him, if to only plague the knave
Who held himself so high above the world.
So presently they fell to talking, when
They learned that both were bound to spend the
night
At the Earl's castle, famous through the land
For its most generous hospitality.
And as it was directly on their way,

It seemed to each a fitting resting place.
But Wilfred also had another reason.
For closely guarded though the maid had been,
Reports of Isobel had spread abroad—
Reports of beauty and her innocence—
Which coming to the ears of Wilfred scarce
A day before he started, fired his heart
And evil nature, and he swore to win
This closely guarded blossom for himself;
To pluck, and wear, and trample under foot
The idle plaything of an idle hour.
So after they had on the tourney talked—
Brian would meet all comers in the lists
And Wilfred with the damsels sit and watch—
Wilfred spake suddenly, in hopes to shock
The virtue of the knight who by him rode.
"Most gallant knight," he said, "perchance thy steps
Have turned in this direction through the same
Good reason as hath turned mine own this way."
But Brian answered gravely, "Nay, my lord,
I know no reason save that I had heard

My Lady Isobel

Of the old Earl's great kindness to all guests,
Though they be friends, or strangers like myself.
And as the castle stood upon my road,
I deemed it wise to rest there for the night.
That is my only reason." Wilfred laughed.
" Hast thou not heard another thing," he asked,
" Beside the Earl's great kindness to his guests?
Hast not heard aught of Lady Isobel?
They call her fairest lady in the land,
And yet her father keeps her closely mewed
Within the castle walls, so none may see
Her beauty or her maiden virtue tempt."
Then Brian answered slowly, with a gleam
Of anger darkening his kindly eye:
" Aye, I have heard reports of a fair maid,
Who, being fair and pure and innocent,
Should be held sacred as some shrinèd saint.
I had forgot until you spoke her name.
I had no thought to see the lady, and
I do thank Heav'n that she is guarded close."
He looked at Wilfred saying this, who laughed,
Pricked up his beast, and hummed a snatch of song.

But Brian rode in silence, stern and grim,
And spake no more until they reached their goal.
When riding first past that high casement he
Looked back in time to see that startled glance,
Dropped kerchief, and confusion of the maid.
And at that sight of her, brief as it was,
His heart grew tender with a feeling new,
And he did swear to save her from the man,
If need should be, who won that startled glance
And dainty trophy. Then he set his eyes
Before him and rode onward ill at ease.
The good Earl made them welcome to his board,
Then sought his daughter, whom he would have
kept
From the bold eyes of Wilfred Vaillard, but
She did remind him of his promise given
That she might play the hostess to his guests,
And won her way by kisses and caress
And all the arts which she was mistress of.
So the good Earl warned her most earnestly
Against Sir Wilfred. "Trust him not, my child,
But rather listen to that noble knight,

Sir Brian Guilleforde. Glad am I to meet
This man at last, for he hath fair report—
As fair report as hath Sir Wilfred foul.
I tell thee, Isobel—beware of him!"
Then Isobel uplifted her great eyes, saying:
"Was the dark man who bore himself
With such an upright carriage on his steed
Sir Brian Guilleforde, and the one who rode
The dainty charger, white as driven snow,
Was *he* Sir Wilfred, whom you warn me of?"
"Thou hast guessed rightly," then the Earl replied.
"He who rode on the charger black as night
Was Brian Guilleforde—knight and gentleman.
The other was Sir Wilfred—rogue and knave.
Beware of him, my child; I say beware!"
And saying thus, he left her. Slow she turned
To don her richest garments, but her eyes
Were dreamy as the clouds in summer time,
And a half smile played round her rosy mouth.
"But he was fair," she whispered blushingly,
"And hath my kerchief. Might my father err?
Rumor is often false I've heard it said,

And sometimes foul is fair and fair is foul,
And, oh, he looked a gallant gentleman!"
So when at noon they gathered round the board,
The Earl arose and spoke with lawful pride.
His guests did listen gladly, for his speech
Was of his child, the Lady Isobel.
" Fair sirs," he said, " my dear and only child
For the first time in all her eighteen years
Will grace this board to-day when guests are here.
For hitherto, as mayhap ye have heard,
I've guarded her as some rare, priceless jewel,
And such, forsooth, good sirs, she is to me.
She hath been kept unspotted from the world.
My lords, she is as sweetly innocent
As any new-born babe; and this I say
That ye may treat her as ye would a child,
And take no base advantage of her." Then
He fixed his eye on Wilfred, who arose
With all the easy grace belonging to him,
And holding high his glass, cried clearly out:
" A toast to Lady Isobel. To pledge
Our loyalty to her and understanding

Of her good father's wishes." And so true
Rang out his tone that straight the Earl was moved
To think he had misjudged him, and the tales
Which he had heard perchance might not be true.
Therefore he looked more kindly on the knave
And felt his heart grow lighter for his child.
And then all rose to greet her as she came
Right proudly up the oaken raftered hall,
As though she were a queen and sought her throne.
But underneath the laces of her gown
Her heart was beating madly, and her eyes
Though downcast caught a gleam of golden hair
Belonging to Sir Wilfred. No one saw
The little start she gave. Nay, one, himself,
And it was well he turned his face away;
For had she seen the look within his eyes
Small love she could have given after that.
The Lady Isobel was gowned in gray;
Soft shades of shimmering gray that fell in folds
Whose every curve was grace personified.
Her bosom, white as apple blooms in spring,
Was half concealed beneath a film of lace,

Witch Isobel

Like to a cobweb on the dewy lea.
A belt of opals girt her slender waist
And flashed their deadly beauty flauntingly
In changing colors,—red and blue and gold,—
So that her waist seemed banded by a flame.
They were her birthstones so she feared them not,
But prized them, for her mother wore them once.
Her long dead mother, whom she only knew
By hearsay and in dreams, so short and sweet
That when she woke, she longed to dream again.
Advancing down the hall with stately tread,
She seemed a vision of the twilight hour.
Her grayish gown, the tender evening shades,
The opals the last fire of the sun
Before he sinks to rest behind the hills.
That day her cheeks had on a tinge of pink,
And were not colorless as was their wont,
And so amazing beautiful was she—
A child no longer, but a woman grown—
That e'en her father gazed with all his eyes
And marvelled at the change he saw in her.
So when she reached him, loud he cleared his throat

And dashed a hand across his tear-dimmed eye,
For she was like her mother. Ah, so like
It seemed the mother in her early years
Had come again to give him joy and love.
"This is my daughter, sirs," he said at last,
"The Lady Isobel of whom I spake.
Witch Isobel, this is that valiant knight,
Sir Brian Guilleforde." Brian bent his knee
In homage he had ne'er so truly paid.
For though full many eyes had smiled on him,
He never yet had loved and lost his heart
Until this day. The Lady Isobel
Gave him fair greeting, while her father turned
To Wilfred Vaillard, saying: "This, my child,
This is Sir Wilfred Vaillard—high at court."
Sir Wilfred lightly fell upon one knee
And Lady Isobel bent low her head,
That none might see the lovelight in her eyes.
But as he rose and slow she raised her head,
Their glances met again, and in his eyes
She read a tale that made her mad with joy,
Believing she had found her knight at last.

Witch Isobel

In a far corner sat the squire and page,
The squire with his eyes upon the floor,
But the fair page leaned forward with his glance
Fixed searchingly on Lady Isobel.
And when he saw that look between the two,
Did he grow paler, or was it the gloom
Of the dim corner where he idly sat—
His red-gold hair the only spot of light?
When the long meal was finished, Isobel
Rose to depart, with bow and smile to all;
But passing by that corner dim she paused,
Wide eyed, in admiration of the page,
Who, seeing her thus standing, rose and stood
Humbly before her in his russet dress,
Embroidered with Sir Wilfred's coat of arms.
Then Wilfred came and stood beside her while
The others lingered yet about the board.
"Is this thy page?" quoth Lady Isobel.
"He is the fairest stripling I have seen.
Such beauty seemeth wasted in a boy;
'Tis like a maid's, and should belong to one.
Marry, how white the poor lad grows, my lord.

The ride hath proved too arduous for him,
He is so slender and not over strong.
Sit down, dear lad, and I will bring thee wine."
She filled a goblet and came swiftly back
With frighted eyes and gentle sympathy.
When he had drunk the wine, the color came
Back to the lad's pale cheeks as flush of dawn
Comes creeping slowly to the waiting east.
And, glancing up, he murmured soft and low,
" I thank thee, lady, thou art good and kind,
I pray that Heaven send thee peace and joy."
His voice was passing sweet and musical
And Isobel, by some strange impulse spurred,
Leaned down and kissed him swiftly on the brow,
Saying: " Thou art so young to ride abroad.
Dear lad, thou shouldst be with thy mother still."
The lad went white again, and his blue eyes
Filled suddenly with tears that overflowed
And two bright drops ran down his pallid cheeks.
And seeing them, the Lady Isobel
Reached out her hand and laid it on the lad's,
And, lo! her own was no more white than his,

And not a whit more shapely. Then the boy
Carried that tender hand unto his lips,
Murmuring softly, " Bless thee, sweetest lady."
And Isobel uplifted her dark eyes
Unto Sir Wilfred's puzzled, eager face,
Saying: " Be kind to him and give him rest."
Whereat Sir Wilfred, bowing low, replied,
" Thy slightest saying is a law to me,
I dare not disobey. Go hence, my lad,
I will not need thee till the evening hour."
Then Lady Isobel walked down the hall,
With Wilfred Vaillard strolling by her side;
But yet he dared not whisper loving words
Into her ear, for fear her father watched.
Yet ere she left him by the massive door,
He whispered softly, " I shall pine and die
Until this evening, when again I see
Thy face, which is the fairest in the land.
Thy father likes me not; I pray thee, then,
Grant me a private interview, my queen,
And let thy subject show his loyalty."
The Lady Isobel flushed red and paled,

Raising her eyes confidingly to his.
" Oh, surely was my father wrong," she thought.
" This is a noble gentleman and true.
And loving him, I trust him, for no love
Is truely love without a perfect trust."
" This evening when I leave the hall," she said,
" I'll meet thee in my garden—fare thee well."
" Thou art a child indeed," Sir Wilfred thought;
" Such perfect innocence will tire me soon,
But while 'tis new 'tis pleasing to my mind."
So thinking, he rejoined the Earl and Guilleforde.

Part Two

Part Two

THE PAGE

HAT evening blazed a fire in the huge
Black yawning fireplace; it softly blazed,
For though the nights were chill, yet
'twas the spring.
It cast strange, flickering shadows round the hall—
Dark, lurking shadows like the ills of life—
And on the face of Lady Isobel
It threw a rosy glow, which made her seem
More lovely, if 'twere possible. She sat
In a great chair made out of ebony,
Her head against the high and carvèd back,
She looked a sculptured saint in chancel wall.
The whiteness of her dress against the black
Threw out the beauty of her slender form,
And made the whole divinely beautiful.

My Lady Isobel

Sir Wilfred lounged before the flickering fire,
Not daring to pay open court to her,
While Brian and the Earl conversed apart.
But ever and again did Brian's eyes
Turn as the weather vane which seeks the wind,
Or as the humming-bird which seeks the rose,
To where the Lady Isobel was placed.
And fain would he have gone and talked with her,
But that his bashfulness held him aloof.
Deeming himself unused to women's ways,
A rough, untutored boor, he dared not go
Near to such beauty and such daintiness.
But still his heart was there, and there alone,
And he suspicioned Wilfred's quietness,
And longed to warn the lady of his love,
Yet dared not, for he saw not how he could,
And he disliked to slander any one.
Therefore he merely watched her, fed his love
On sight of her, and awe, and longing dreams.
Sir Wilfred stirred himself to call his page,
Who stood not far from Lady Isobel,
Whom now the lad adored with all his soul

The Page

Since that sweet kiss and gracious sympathy.
" Sing, page," Sir Wilfred cried with merry voice.
" The nightingale hath nested in thy throat,
I pray thee sing a song of truest love! "
And as he said this, Wilfred turned his eyes
To Lady Isobel, and held her look
For one brief instant ere he let it fall,
And turned him once again unto the fire.
The page came forward close before the chair
Wherein she sat. His face was very pale
And his sweet voice was low and tremulous.
" I have no song of truest love," he said,
" So, if I sing, my lord, my song must be
Of love which seemeth true but yet is false.
True love, my lord, has passed beyond my ken.
I have not met it yet." Sir Wilfred turned,
Surprised, displeased, amused. " My faith," he cried,
" But thou art over young to speak like that.
Hast thou already met with love, and false? "
The page glanced past him to the dancing flames,
Answering slowly, with an absent air,

" Aye, good my lord, full young though I may be,
Already have I met with love—*and false!*"
The last words rang out sharply. Isobel
Shivered, she knew not why, and Brian turned
His kindly glance to where the stripling stood.
And from the page, as seeks a bird its nest,
The glance sought Isobel and rested there.
And seeing it, she smiled in friendly way.
But though the smile was warm it chilled his breast,
For love scorns friendship—wanting love alone.
Then Isobel spake softly to the page.
" Dear lad," she said, " sing whatsoe'er thou wilt,
I trow it will be pleasing to us all.
My lord," she added, turning in her chair
And speaking low to Wilfred where he sat—
" My lord, I am a simple, foolish maid,
But something tells me we are ne'er too young
To love and lose that love if it prove false."
Thus saying, back she turned unto the page,
Who, looking at her with a startled air,
As though surprised to hear such words from her,
Glanced at Sir Wilfred and began to sing.

The Page

SONG OF THE PAGE.

Love came to me when I was young and fair,
He placed a wreath of roses on my hair.
One sought me out with proud and haughty tread.
I doubted not, for perfect love is trust—
We fear no sword till we have felt its thrust—
He loved but me and me alone, he said.

Love turned from me when I was young and fair,
And plucked the faded roses from my hair.
One said, " I love thee not, thou foolish child,
I thank thee for a merry hour of play,
The great world beckons and I ride away,"
And at my anguish heartlessly he smiled.

I followed Love when I was young and fair,
And begged fresh roses to recrown my hair,
But Love turned coldly from me with a sneer.
" Trust not in man, trust not in man," he said,
" Unless he comes to thee with humble tread.
'Tis then he loves thee, and thou need not fear."

My Lady Isobel.

There fell a mighty silence through the hall
As the last notes hung sweet and tremulous—
Like to a bell—before they died away.
It seemed a soul
From out the fast-barred portals of the skies
Had found the golden key, unlocked the gate,
And floating downward through the silver mist
Had loosed a flood of music on the world—
The music of its joy and woe and sin.
But through it all there rang a warning note,
Deep and mysterious, fraught with hidden pain,
As though the soul which sang the wondrous song
Would say, " Once having suffered I would save
All others from such suffering as mine."
The ancient rafters caught and held the notes
Softly imprisoned in their oaken arms,
Loath to let go—they were so beautiful.
The very flames seemed to be listening
And flickered faint, as though they held their breath.
Wilfred sat darkly scowling by the fire,
But Brian at the ending of the song

The Page

Cast one long look on Lady Isobel
Which said, " I would to thee most humbly come,
Because I love thee with my heart and soul."
She saw it not, and Brian deemed it best.
Her eyes were fixed intently on the page,
And she was dead to aught beside the song,
Which chilled her, though it held her close enthralled.
The page seemed singing but to her alone,
The lad's great eyes, with warning in their depths,
Were on her face the while he softly sang,
With all his soul in voice and words and look.
And as he ceasèd, Isobel awoke
As from a troubled dream, drew slow her hand
Across her brow and heaved a gentle sigh.
Sir Wilfred, with a frown upon his brow,
Crossed to the page and laid one jewelled hand
Upon the slender shoulder of the lad.
" Hast thou no gayer chant than that to sing? "
He asked, half angrily. " No gayer chant
To stir the blood and kindle merry mood?
My faith! if thou hast not, sing then no more."

The page shook off the hand as though it burned,
And drawing himself upward with an air
Most royal to behold, made answer slow:
" My lord, alas, I have no gayer chant,
And so will sing no more, but only say
I trust that all may profit by my song."
And saying this, looked hard at Isobel,
Who, still half troubled, though she knew not why,
Felt cold, and rising went unto the fire,
While the fair page bowed low and took his leave.
At ten o'clock the Lady Isobel
Made ready to depart, as was her wont.
Her heart beat wildly, thinking of the tryst
She was about to keep, for when she rose
To go, Sir Wilfred likewise did arise,
And striding to her father smiling, said:
" I am aweary, and will crave your grace
To pardon me if I withdraw myself."
And making his adieus went quickly forth,
But not before he breathed to Isobel,
" The garden," and her eyes had answered his.
She kissed her father far more tenderly

Than was her wont, and on Sir Brian cast
A look and smile which charmed and dazzled him,
It was so full of youth and happiness.
It so beguiled him that he walked with her
Unto the door, and as he said good-night,
Bowing in homage o'er one slender hand,
His lips were very near it, but he dared
Not touch so fair a shrine, so let it go,
And watched her as she flitted from his sight,
A snowy figure down the dusky hall.
Once hidden from his eyes, her footsteps flew
More swiftly, and she caught a silken shawl
From off a chair and twined its silken folds
About her supple figure as she sped,
Till coming to the secret door which gave
Into her garden by a private way,
She paused to still her heart and gain her breath.
Then opened it and softly glided through.
Sir Wilfred knew not of her private way,
And so his back was toward her as he stood,
The moonlight falling on his golden hair.
She paused a moment, gazing unobserved.

My Lady Isobel

The fragrance of the violets filled the air,
Like to some subtle haunting harmony;
The hyacinths stood straight as sentinels,
Their colors showing ghostly 'neath the moon;
The baby rosebuds on each parent stem
Seemed listening to the whisper of the night.
From out a bush, all white as driven snow
With fair Spring flowers, a bird was carolling
A plaintive carol 'mid the cool, still night,
As though it sang and waited for its mate,
Who, with his fragile wings from out the south,
Perchance e'en now was flying on his way
To that sweet bower and his little love.
The moon, no more a crescent, nor as yet
Resplendent in its perfect unity,
Shone down upon the Lady Isobel,
And lent a witching spell unto the hour.
Then of a sudden Wilfred turned about
And saw the lady where she shyly stood,
And springing forward would have clasped her close,
But that she stayed him with uplifted hand.

" Not so, my lord, not so," she firmly said.
" Be not too hasty; woo and win me first.
No man hath ever held me in his arms
Save my dear father, whom I now deceive.
Speak quickly, for I must not tarry here.
Speak gently, for remember that the song
Saith he who humbly comes, 'tis he who loves."
The fair page, hidden by a screen of leaves,
Breathed low, " Thank God!" when thus spake Isobel,
Then held his breath to catch aught else that passed.
" Speak now," the Lady Isobel went on;
" I must not stay, my conscience pricks me sore
At doing what my father knows not of.
And were it not that I do think thee wronged,
I would not meet thee in this way to-night."
" When I have told thee of my love," he said,
" Its warmth must still thy doubting and disfuse
The fever coursing in my veins to thine.
Be not so cold, dear lady, and my queen.
Give me thy lips that I may teach them love."
And saying this he caught her in his arms

And made to kiss her; but she drew away,
Affrighted by the violence of his words.
Then Wilfred, seeing her not lightly won,
Calming his passion, wooed by gentle means,
And ere they parted won her faint consent
To marry him when he returned again,
With a good priest to wed them secretly.
" Then, when I win thy father's love and trust,
We will disclose our marriage," Wilfred said,
And with a store of choice and cunning words
Blinded her, so she saw not right from wrong,
But trusted him in love and innocence.
So when at length she slipped from out his arms,
She said: " Farewell, my lord, yet not for long.
I'll pray for thee and for myself as well,
And still I love thee; it can be no wrong
When I do love thee, ah, so dear—so dear!
That if I asked my father, and he said
I could not wed thee, I should pine and die.
He loves thee not, but when we once are wed
It must be well; thou wilt be part of me,
And therefore sacred to him. I am young

And ignorant, but thou art good and wise,
And so I trust thee; dear my lord, farewell.
In one short week we two will meet again."
When Wilfred Vaillard reached his room the page
Sat silent by the fire with pallid face
And eyes grown dark and wide with unshed tears,
Which, when Sir Wilfred entered, dried to scorn
Or something stronger—hate. Yet something else
More mighty than these two leapt into life
The moment that Sir Wilfred Vaillard came.
Sir Wilfred noted that the lad was pale—
Aye, even trembling—so he laid a hand
Upon the ruddy ringlets, for his mood
Was kind to-night because of Isobel.
And as he placed his hand among the curls
The lad upon a sudden raised his face,
Grown rosy in an instant, while the eyes
Flashed for a moment with a startling light—
Such glance a loving woman gives to man
When all her heart and soul and life are his.
Sir Wilfred started at the page's look.
The boy was passing fair beyond a doubt,

My Lady Isobel

And were he but a woman might eclipse
The darker charms of Lady Isobel,
For Wilfred liked a fairer loveliness.
And as he thought a swift remembrance stirred
His mind, and he accounted for an air,
A vague resemblance clinging to his page,
Which from the very first had puzzled him.
" 'Tis strange indeed," he said, " thou hast *her* look,
'Tis strange I had not traced it out before
Save that I almost had forgotten her."
The page drew backward with a frighted glance,
And quickly turned his face unto the fire.
" Do I resemble some one then, my lord? "
He questioned boldly. " Some fair lady, too?
Oh, by my faith! 'tis time I grew a beard
Or donned a sword to give me manly air.
It suits me not to look so like a girl."
Sir Wilfred laughed. " Wert thou a girl," he said,
" I'd gain a love, although I'd lose a page.
In truth had *she* but borne thy riper charms,
And been not such a frail slip of a thing—
A pretty, loving child, too thin by far—

I might have made that mocking marriage real—
Fetched out a true priest, not a worthless sham—
And been Sir Wilfred Vaillard, married man!
For that frail child, with curls of ruddy hair
So like to thine, came nearer to my heart
Than all the women I have ever known.
And had she been but less the child and more
The woman, might have bound me to her side.
Ah, well! I grew aweary—rode away
And left her to her childish grief and tears;
For after all she was a child—no more.
And that—why, that was five long years ago.
I had almost forgot her. It is strange
I can remember all her ways so clear.
Perchance because she was the first I loved—
Say, rather, fancied; but be proud of this,
Sweet Mistress Rotha, of the long ago,
That Wilfred Vaillard hath remembered thee
After five years; a thing he cannot say
Of any other woman he hath—loved!"
The page stood listening with averted face,
And as he listened went from red to white,

And after that there came a wondrous glow.
So might a soul who deems itself as lost
Look when it sees the gates of Paradise
And hears a voice which bids it enter in.
It seemed as though it were an angel's face,
It was so full of radiance sublime,
Of happiness beyond our mortal ken,
As though it held the sunshine of the world.
Sir Wilfred ceased and ended with a laugh—
A laugh which rang unpleasantly and yet
Rang true, because it held a scorn of self,
A lurking sadness for what might have been.
No living soul had ever seen him thus;
But it is true that deep in every man
There bides a fair and tiny seed of good,
Which blossoms forth, perchance unsought, unasked,
And for the time ennobles and uplifts.
The page, still gazing in the dancing flames,
Asked softly: " She of whom thou speakest now,
If she be half as fair as is her name
She truly must be wondrous beautiful."

The Page

" I know not even if she lives," he said.
" She may be dead or wedded long ago."
" Or she may still be faithful unto thee,
Who unto her hast so unfaithful been."
The fair page whispered soft as in a dream.
Sir Wilfred answered in his gentle mood:
" I wonder if she yet is but the child,
Or if the passing years have moulded her
Into a woman. Nay, that cannot be;
She never could be aught beside the child."
The page half smiled into the glowing fire,
Answering: " Shouldest thou see her once again
Changed by the magic wand of passing years
Into a woman fair and beautiful
And ripe with all the charms thy child love lacked,
Dost think that thou wouldst love her and forget
The paler charms of Lady Isobel? "
And Wilfred Vaillard answered quickly, " Aye,
The Lady Isobel, though young and fair,
Would soon prove tiring through her innocence.
The woman who would hold my fancy long
Must know the world and all its evil ways

And still be pure. I have not met one such,
For either they are sweetly innocent,
Mere pretty playthings, whom 'tis joy to break,
Or else know all, and learning have been smirched.
More likely now the child of long ago
Hath lost the softness from her velvet eyes
And dangles half a dozen idle knights
Behind her, with a brazen smile for each."
The page sighed softly ere he spoke again.
" Thou lookest for the bad in all," he said,
" And seest not the good in any one.
" Dear master "—did he linger on the words?—
" Dear master, lead a nobler life from now
And thou wilt find there are some women still
Who know the world but yet are good and pure.
Made purer, as the metal by the fire,
By all the suffering they have undergone.
Made nobler by past weaknesses, because
It makes them full of gentle sympathy
For their poor brethren who have fallen low.
Give up this life and struggle after good,
Be a brave knight, proud of the shield he bears.

How gladly will I follow after thee!"
But even as the page in ringing voice
Spoke thus, Sir Wilfred's mood passed swift away
As smoke that vanishes upon the breeze.
The good in him went out as some small flame
Extinguished by the blowing of a breath,
And he became the hardened man of old.
" Bridle thy tongue, my lad," he cried in scorn.
" Why have I thus stood prating unto thee?
I've been a fool, remember that, and then
Forget the idle chatter of my tongue,
And know I nothing meant of all I said.
Fetch me my cup of wine and seek thy couch."
When the fair page knelt down that night to pray,
As was his custom spite the scornful jeers
With which Sir Wilfred often greeted him,
He only murmured, " Dear Lord, give me strength."
Then rising, softly crept unto the bed
Where Wilfred Vaillard lay in heavy sleep,
And leaning swiftly over kissed his hair.
Then to his humble pallet at the foot

My Lady Isobel

Of the great bed whereon his master lay,
The lad retired to sleep from weariness.
The moonbeams through the blindless window
stole,
Their gentle fingers touched the lad's sweet face,
Smoothing the lines of weariness away
And bringing all its gentle beauty forth;
They bathed him in a mellow radiance,
But, lost to all beside his dreams—he slept.

Part Three

Part Three

BRIAN GUILLEFORDE

EXT morning, when the first faint flush
of dawn
Had flung its banner 'gainst the Eastern
sky,
Sir Brian Guilleforde in the garden stood,
His thoughts upon the Lady Isobel—
The lady now of all his love and dreams.
And as he thought upon her youthful grace
A soft hand laid upon his arm bestirred
His straying thoughts and brought them back to
earth,
And turning, he beheld Sir Wilfred's page.
"Sir Brian Guilleforde," spoke the stripling then,
"If I read rightly thou art deep in love
With Lady Isobel." Sir Brian flushed;

A crimson tide rushed to his swarthy face,
And those bold eyes which sternly faced the foe
Fell now before the laughter in the glance
Upon him. " 'Tis no right of thine," he said.
" Begone, and pry not thou in my affairs."
The page grew solemn in a moment then,
And spoke in eager accents, quick and low—
" Aye, lord, it *is* a right of mine," he said,
" For I, too, love the Lady Isobel,
And, knowing what I do, would save her from
The wiles of Wilfred Vaillard, as wouldst thou."
Then Brian started, thinking of his fears
When first they came upon the yester morn;
When she had dropped her kerchief, he had sworn
To save her from the shame of Wilfred's love.
But though he'd seen the tend of Wilfred's ways,
He had reflected they must onward ride
Upon the morrow—in so short a time
He hardly thought that any harm could come,
For, knowing not of that sweet garden tryst,
He prayed when Wilfred went she would forget
His tender glances and his gentle sighs,

And did not dream that he would come again,
Liking so well to love and ride away.
But now his fears leaped into quickened life,
And, looking earnestly upon the lad,
He questioned fiercely: "Come, what dost thou know?
And yet thou art his page—what trick is this
Thy master plays upon me, sending thee?"
"No trick, my lord, no trick," the page replied.
"I speak the truth; it is my love for her—
And yes—a graver reason brings me here.
But rest assured my master sent me not,
And could he hear what I am telling thee,
My life the penalty would swiftly pay.
But first, to make assurance doubly sure,
Before I tell thee, I do wish to hear
Thee say: 'I love the Lady Isobel,'
For then I'll tell thee all with easy mind.
I could not be mistaken in thy glance
When it did rest upon her in the hall.
My song was fitting, was it not, Sir Knight?
A warning—and the story of my life.

Come, tell the truth, and I will tell my tale."
Then Brian's mighty voice grew soft and low,
Shaken with feeling, tender as a maid's,
As he replied: " Since thou wilt have it so,
'Tis true—I love the Lady Isobel.
No one save thou must know it till I die;
But then, when life is ebbing fast away,
I'll cry her name and die most happily
With that dear name on my unworthy lips.
For who am I that dares to love her thus?
A knight untutored, rough and penniless,
Save his good sword and ever-faithful steed.
I dare not speak and ask her for mine own,
So, loving always, silent will remain—
Pass from her life as ripples from the stream,
And be as soon forgot as they by those
Who watch them as they quiver and depart.
Oh, Isobel! my lady and my love!
Be thankful, lad, thy heart is still thine own;
Once losing it, thou knowest rest no more,
Yet still would never have it back again."
Sir Brian ceasèd with a mighty sigh,

Stood for a moment silent, then exclaimed:
" Now I have laid before thee all mine heart,
For thou hast all a woman's sympathy
In eye and voice and manner, little lad.
Come, tell thy tale, and guard my secret well,
For I have trusted thee and ever will."
The page drew closer to Sir Brian's side,
Laid one small hand upon the knight's strong arm
And questioned softly: " Art thine eyes so dull
Thou canst not see the woman in the page?
Am I so boyish, then, though yet a maid,
Or yet no maid—but Wilfred Vaillard's wife!"
At this Sir Brian started back a pace
And eyed the lad with wonder in his glance,
Which changed to understanding as he gazed;
Grew slowly red beneath his coat of tan,
And muttered, " By my faith, 'tis even so—
Art thou another victim of his wiles?
What dost thou in his service and this dress?
His wife—that cannot be—thy tale—thy tale."
The page made answer: " Truly it is so,
As thou wilt find when I do tell thee all.

My Lady Isobel

When I was but a child and little more,
Sir Wilfred saw me in my father's home,
As he hath seen the Lady Isobel.
I was as innocent and pure as she;
My life as closely guarded as is hers.
My father was a simple, kindly man,
And nothing knew about the gallant knight
Save that he seemèd of a fair report;
And so Sir Wilfred lingered by my side
Until he won my love. Then, knowing well
I deemed his love as honest and would fly
Did I believe it otherwise (as now
He knows the Lady Isobel would do),
He did deceive my father and myself
By a mock marriage—mock as he supposed,
Yet real, Sir Brian, real, to thee I swear,
And I will show thee proofs when I have done.
Once wedded, he did take me far away
To a fair cottage in a lonely glade,
And there I passed a month of perfect joy—
A sunlit dream, charged with the song of birds,
The scent of roses and the breath of love.

Then, being but a child, as I have said,
And knowing nothing of the subtle art
By which a woman may enchain a man
And hold his love when it goes wandering,
I wearied him with my poor, simple ways,
My deep affection, far too freely shown,
My kisses and my store of loving words,
My meek submission to his sovereign will.
And so I saw his passion slowly cool
And die away before my very eyes,
But yet had not the skill to call it back.
And then one day he entered where I sat
In pallid silence 'mid a nest of vines,
Saying, 'I now am riding far away;
Go back once more unto thy father, child.
The game is over; it was fair and sweet,
But I am weary—thou hast yet to learn
Men value little where 'tis freely given.
'Tis seeking gives whate'er we wish its worth.
Thou wert too innocent, too pure by far;
Go back and thou wilt find a gayer life
Come easier now thou hast tasted sin.'

I gazed upon him, wondering at his words,
Scarce understanding that which he did say—
But vaguely conscious of a blank despair
Which thrilled my voice as I made answer slow:
'Go back unto my father? Nay, my lord,
My place is ever by my husband's side;
And as for sinning, speak, How have I sinned?
Why am I still not full as innocent,
As pure and good in thought and word and deed
As when I was a maid—who now am wife?'
'Nay, neither wife nor maid,' he answered me;
'My mistress, for our marriage was not real—
'Twas a sham priest; now dost thou understand?'
My heart ceased beating and the world grew black.
I rose, and forcing back my childish tears
I said most firmly: 'Aye, I understand
Thou hast deceived a simple, trusting girl—
Taken his all from a good, honest man
To send it back defaced and honorless—
Betrayed where thou wert trusted. Aye, my lord,
I understand; thou art a villain.' Then,
Being a child, as I have said before,

My tears broke forth, and in a storm of grief
I pled for love; confessed mine own for him;
Clung round his neck, and pressed my tear-wet face
To his, entreating for his love again.
He loosed my arms—' Poor little one,' he said;
' So much the child—cry on—and then forget,'
And, turning, left me to my wild despair.
When, faint and trembling, I had reached my home,
I found my father dead an hour gone—
Aye, dead and spared the knowledge of my shame,
For which I thanked the Lord on bended knee.
I found myself quite poor and all alone,
So journeyed to the court and found a place
As maid in waiting to the gracious queen;
And thither presently Sir Wilfred came,
But I contrived to hide from him unknown.
And presently the difference of my life,
The richer dress, arrangement of my hair,
Lent me a newer beauty, and the child
Merged to a woman, with a thousand ways,
Gay airs and graces I had lacked before,

But with a heart of sadness 'neath it all.
So Wilfred Vaillard and I never met,
And the years passed and many suitors came.
I shook my head and sent them on their way,
Because, alas! I had no love to give—
Once given, I could never call it back.
Deep in my heart I cherished but one dream.
It was that when I deemed myself most fair,
Most fitted for the struggle, I would seek
Sir Wilfred—win where I had failed before,
For much I doubted he would know the child
In me—a woman versed in woman's ways.
Five long and weary years I waited; then,
One day as I was faring home from mass,
Beside the road I saw an aged man
Gasping for breath and lying in the dust.
I had him lodged and cared for, and that eve
I stood beside his couch, and as I gazed
Upon his face, deep lined with suffering,
It seemed that I had seen it once before.
Where had I seen it? Suddenly I knew
It was the very man who wedded me—

Or played to do so. Deep my wrath was stirred,
And long I gazed until he ope'd his eyes,
And seeing me, moaned feebly: 'Am I dead?
This heaven? Thou an angel?' 'Nay,' I said,
'I had thee taken from the road and brought
Where thou couldst rest in comfort for a while;
I am no angel—save a fallen one—
And thou hast aided greatly in my fall.'
He drank the draught I offered to his lips,
And, growing stronger, raised himself and said:
'What dost thou say, my daughter? I—a priest—
To ruin any one? It cannot be.
What harm is it unknowingly I wrought?
Where have I seen thee, for thy face is strange,
And yet not strange—it stirs and baffles me?'
Seeing him stronger, thus I answered him:
'A priest, thou sayest; oh, would that it were so!
Dost not remember playing once the priest
To wed Sir Wilfred Vaillard to a maid
One summer's day and five long years ago?'
'Sir Wilfred Vaillard,' thoughtfully he said;
'Five years ago—since then I've travelled far—

But stay—ah! yes—I do remember well,
A gallant knight with curls of golden hair—
A lovely maid, pale, fragile, but a child
Who should have thought of dolls and not of love.
Ah, yes; my memory as yet is strong,
And it doth even seem as yesterday.
Why, e'en within my bundle have I here
The book wherein thy marriage down is writ
With other couples I have closely joined.
And in that book mine orders likewise bide.
I deem it precious—furnishing proof
Of mine own priesthood—others' wedded state—
And in my wanderings I've held it fast.'
My hand spilled out the wine I gave him then
From beating of my heart with joy divine.
I legally was Wilfred Vaillard's wife—
Might raise my head as proudly as them all,
And some time claim him as my wedded lord.
The joy and pain and rapture of that thought!
Then covered I the good priest's kindly hand
With tears and kisses as I told my tale.
' But Wilfred thought thou wert no priest,' I said.

'How came it so, I wonder—truly 'tis
The workings of a mighty Providence.'
'I know not, daughter,' the old man replied,
'Save that Sir Wilfred's serving man did come
To ask my services—a stupid wretch,
I even now remember his dull look;
'Tis he, perchance, who made the strange mistake:
Caused thee to wedded be most fast and sure.'
And so, Sir Brian, I am Wilfred's wife,
And hidden in my bosom lie the proofs,
While in a hamlet twenty miles from here
Lives the good priest and listens for my call.
Now will I tell thee how it is I come
To serve my husband in this mannish guise.
Dost think it forward and unwomanly?
I wished to study him, myself unknown,
To learn if I could ever hope to win
His love. Thou art a just and honest man
And wilt not blame me for it overmuch."
She ceased—a note of pathos in her voice
And on her face a gentle wistfulness,
For all craved Brian Guilleforde's good esteem.

My Lady Isobel

The knight had listened as she told her tale
With half-averted face—she could not see
The looks of scorn for Wilfred, sympathy,
Grief for herself, and pity most divine
Sweep over it as clouds across the sky.
But now he laid a hand upon her head—
A tender hand upon the ruddy hair—
Saying: " Dear child, thou art most womanly;
Thy every action shows the woman, for
'Tis woman's fate to love through everything—
Stand shame and scorn and sorrow all for love—
And nothing better can I say than this
To show how I respect and honor thee—
Than that I deem thee worthy for the friend
Of that dear lady I so dearly love."
Then Rotha told him of the garden tryst
And everything that she had overheard.
" She loves him; it will break her heart," he said,
" When she doth know him even as he is.
What would I give to keep her from this woe! "
" 'Twill trouble her but for a little space,"
Rotha made answer, " for she loves him not.

'Tis but a passing fancy—counterfeit
Of love—the child knows not the difference.
'Twill be a rude awakening from a dream
She deemed most fair; a tear or so may fall,
More for the brightness of the vanished dream
Than for lost love; 'twill not so bitter be
As thou dost fancy—the awakening
May prove more fair than ever was the dream."
" What meanest thou? " Sir Brian questioned slow,
His voice more even than it first had shown;
Those words, " She loves him not," had eased the pain
Which caused his heart to beat uncertainly.
Rotha smiled faintly ere she made reply.
" I'll tell thee truly at some later day.
Ride not unto the tourney; bide thou here.
Fall ill, and let Sir Wilfred ride alone,
Save that good lad, his ever-faithful page.
Leave all to me, and, prithee, fret thee not,
But pay thy court to Lady Isobel.
Let not thy poverty prevent thy suit,
For there is naught should turn aside true love."

When she had ceasèd speaking, Brian took
The lovely face between his mighty hands,
Saying: " Dear child, thou canst not win his love;
He hath no heart; save thou sweet Isobel,
Then leave him to his suffering and his shame—
If such as he can suffer or feel shame."
Rotha smiled softly into Brian's eyes.
" There is some good in every one," she said,
" And I have learned that I can win his love.
I am more happy than in five long years."
" And I more miserable," Sir Brian groaned.
" And yet my torment is my happiness.
Dear lady, I have never seen a love
More great than thine. I wish thee all success.
Farewell until we meet again—farewell."
Then bending, kissed her on her ruddy hair,
And hied him to the chamber where he slept,
While the fair page sped back to serve his lord.
He found Sir Wilfred sleeping, with an arm
Thrown high above his head among his curls.
Sleep softened all the hard lines in his face,
Making him passing fair and lovable.

Rotha gazed long; then bending swiftly down
She pressed a kiss upon the parted lips.
He stirred and murmured softly, " Is it true,
Rotha—she kissed me? " opened wide his eyes
To see his page stand silent by his side;
And a strange something in the lad's sweet face
Made Wilfred question, " Dost thou love me so,
My lad; wilt thou stand by me then in all? "
Made the fair page his answer fervently:
" I wear thy emblem broidered on my dress;
He whom I serve I serve unto the death—
And after, if it be so that I may."
But Wilfred dared not tell him of the scheme
By which he sought to win fair Isobel,
Knowing the lad's great fondness for the maid.
So, rising, made him ready to depart.
And presently Sir Brian's squire came
Saying his master was in sudden pain
And could not ride with Wilfred to the lists,
But e'en must bide in suffering where he lay.
So Wilfred and his page rode out alone;
And Isobel, fresh risen from her sleep,

My Lady Isobel

With eyes like stars and dusky hair unbound,
Leaned from her window when she heard the stir
Of their departure—leaned, and dropped a rose:
One crimson rose as perfect as her heart.
And Wilfred met her eyes with one long look,
Then kissed the rose; but made no other sign.
When they had ridden onward for a way
He tossed the rose behind him to his page.
" 'Tis from thy lady love," he lightly said;
" I am so generous I'll give it thee."
Rotha had caught the rose, but when her lord
Looked not she dropped it quickly in the dust.

Sir Brian kept his room the livelong day,
And Isobel, learning that he was ill,
And seeing that he had not ridden forth,
With gentle heart all filled with sympathy
Gathered a bunch of roses wet with dew—
Pale, perfect pink, like tinting of a shell,
And lustrous white, red veined and wonderful—
Sending them to him by his trusty squire.
" Tell thy good lord," said Lady Isobel,

" I am most sorry that he cannot ride
Unto the tourney, for I know right well
How he doth love such combat. Give him these
And tell him they are Nature's comforters."
Sir Brian took the roses with the light
Of his great love burning within his eyes,
But when he heard the message heaved a sigh.
" Had it been Wilfred Vaillard, now," he thought,
" She'd bless the fate that held him prisoner,
Not be ' most sorry that he could not ride.'
I would that he were worthy of her love,
And that I did not care for her. I know
That even could I have her priceless self
I could not ask it, beggar that I am,
Who could not give her all that she has now—
The luxury and comfort that she craves—
Which is her right. Could I but give her those,
Surround her with the rarest and the best,
I'd lay my all before her tiny feet,
And tell her of the love which stifles me.
Come, Brian, be a man, and since, alas!
Thou lovest and in vain, use all thy skill

To save her from the misery she seeks,
Poor, blinded child, deeming it happiness."
The second day Sir Brian left his room,
And, walking in the garden for a while,
Came face to face with Lady Isobel,
Clad in a clinging gown of purest white,
A crimson rose upon her bosom and
Another in the masses of her hair,
From off the self-same bush from which she plucked
The rose she dropped to wish her love farewell.
Sir Brian greeted her and would have passed
But that she stayed him with uplifted hand,
Saying, " So thou art better. I am glad.
Wilt thou remain till thou art strong again?
Thy friend "—her pale face flushed and the red rose
Trembled above the beating of her heart—
" Thy friend stops here on his return; wilt thou
Not wait for him—or must thou onward ride? "
Sir Brian frowned before he made reply
That she should call him Wilfred Vaillard's friend;
And yet he dared say nothing 'gainst him, for
He leaned on Rotha, trusting to her skill

To ravel out this tangled web of fate.
Sir Brian liked not to deceive the maid
He loved so dearly; yet 'twas for the best,
And so he slowly, gently answered her:
" Dear lady, I am hardly strong as yet,
And will await my—friend till he returns.
I thank thee for thy hospitality,
And crave thy pardon for my loitering."
The lady smiled, and as she did so looked
Into the eyes before her. With a start
She saw that they were fearless—beautiful
With something Wilfred's never could attain.
They could command and kindle at their will,
Or grow full soft and tender, she was sure.
How would they look when that stern light was gone
And they were soft and tender? She must see.
So, smiling still, she answered sweetly: " Sir,
Pray crave no pardon for thy tarrying;
'Tis we who should feel honored by thy stay,
For Brian Guilleforde is a noble name,
And it is always linked with noble deeds,

And ever spoke where noble tales are told.
Thy mother must be very proud of thee;
Would that I had mine to be proud of me."
This said she, thinking thus to soften him,
Yet speaking from the fulness of her heart.
And it was even as she would have wished,
For Brian's eyes grew dim with unshed tears
As he replied: " My mother—rest her soul—
Hath now been dead these twenty years or more.
I have no mother—nay, nor kith nor kin;
My horse and sword are everything I own,
But both are ever faithful unto me."
To see this stern man all so greatly moved
Made Isobel to wonder, and at once
She longed for power to move him—woman-like.
" If thou art not too weary, sir," she said,
" Come with me to this little nest of vines
And tell me of the tourney, for I long
To see one. My dear father promised me
I should go with him presently, and so
I fain would hear of them from one who oft
Hath clashed his arms 'gainst others' in the lists."

So Brian hied him with her to the bower,
And there, inspired by her interest—all
Her sudden starts and little words of praise,
Wide-open eyes and softly parted lips,
A little hand, snow white, upon his arm,
Forgotten in the tenseness of her thought—
He spake as he had never done before,
And told her tales to which her books were naught,
Because they were the chapters of his life.
So simple minded was the honest knight
He never saw the bravery of his deeds,
But told them just as though they mattered not.
And when she murmured, " Oh! 'twas brave, 'twas
brave,
I would have seen thee do it," he would say,
" In faith, but there was nothing else to do."
And when he told her of a gentle maid
For whose fair honor he had fought 'gainst odds
So heavy that it seemed like certain death,
And she cried warmly, " Thou wouldst risk thy life
For one whom thou hadst never seen before;
What wouldst thou do for one thou knewest well?

Thou risked thy life for one thou didst not love;
What wouldst thou do for one thou lovedst?"—then
She ceased and sat in silence for a space,
While good Sir Brian went from red to white.
Whereupon Isobel let fall her hand
From off his arm, where it had thrilled him through
With a strange, subtle, pain-fraught ecstasy,
Looked up at him with wonder in her glance,
Thanked him most prettily, and took her leave,
Pondering deeply, " Who, to look at him,
Would at first glance believe him such a man? "
But then her thoughts to Wilfred Vaillard flew,
Like little birds to nest in nesting time.

On the last day ere Wilfred Vaillard came,
Brian and Isobel sat side by side
Within the garden, where they now had sat
Each day since that first morning hour when
He told her tales within the vine-clad bower.
But now it was not of the clash of steel,
The battle cry or din and fierce alarms.
They spoke of love—great ruler of the world,

For Isobel had learned to call him "friend"
In that short time, and liked him passing well;
Valued his goodness and his judgment true;
Leaned on his wisdom; trusted to his word,
But never guessed the secret of his heart,
So well he hid it from her—seared his soul
As with a red-hot iron with his love
By being with her; forced to stone-like calm
The while his veins were tingling from her touch;
His ears athrob with music of her voice;
His eyes on fire with all her loveliness;
His lips athirst to taste the sweet of hers,
And all the rugged nature of the man
So stern in self-repression, well-nigh broke
By this fierce strife he ne'er had felt before.
Now, as the time drew near for her to keep
Her promise to Sir Wilfred, Isobel
Grew troubled with a deep and vague alarm.
The glamour he had cast about had flown
When he was gone. In Brian's presence she
Grew noble and again she clearly saw
Plain right from wrong—her love felt not so keen,

My Lady Isobel

Although she would not own it to herself,
And half her nights were spent in frighted tears.
This morning then she spake to Brian thus:
" Dear friend, wilt pardon me if I intrude
Upon thy inmost feelings—I would ask
One question of thee—wilt thou tell it me? "
And Brian answered: " Ask and it is thine."
Then Isobel, her hands upon her knee,
Her eager eyes upon his stern, dark face,
Said: " Tell me, hast thou ever been in love? "
And Brian answered her most simply, " Aye."
" When *thou dost love*, I know *'tis love*," she said.
" And I would know what thou dost think of it.
What is true love, I prithee tell it me? "
Then Brian, with his eyes upon the ground,
Spoke in a voice whose passion thrilled her through.
" True love is deep oblivion of self
Above aught else—effacement of thy will,
Thy thoughts, desires—aye, all that thou wouldst do.
Thy happiness must count for naught beside
The happiness and welfare of thy love.

Suffer to give that happiness—nor grudge
Most bitter pain if but that other smile.
All must be darkness when she is not near,
But golden sunlight when she passes by.
The eyes should only have one resting-place,
The lips one name to cry before the world,
The ears one music—deaf to aught beside.
Deaf, dumb, and blind thou then shouldst ever be
To all the world—save only thy fair love.
'Tis so I love—'tis so all should who love;
And if they do not, then their love is false."
He ceased, while Isobel with parted lips
Sat silent for a moment ere she breathed—
" Happy the lady whom thou lovest so;
She must be very beautiful and fair."
And Brian answered, " She is passing fair,
And, what is strange, as good as she is fair."
Then Isobel arose and went away,
Resolving when she saw Sir Wilfred she
Would bid him wait until they both were sure
They loved each other, heart and mind and soul,
As Brian Guilleforde told her love should be.

Part Four

Part Four

TRUE LOVE

HEN they had ridden homeward till the sun
Rode high within the heavens, the fair page
Spurred forward till he reached Sir Wilfred's side.
" My master, a short way from here," he said,
" There lives a man who hath a simple mind
And doth imagine that he is a priest.
So firm the fancy in his brain is fixed
He clothes himself in priest-like garments, speaks
As though for many years the faith he'd served.
I know him for a good and kindly soul
Whom no one harms, or yet harms no one, though
I've often wondered, aye, and wonder now,
If any, knowing not his feeble mind

And deeming him a priest in very sooth,
Should ask that he should wed them—would he
do it,
Or hath his conscience still a glimmering
Amid the heavy mists which shroud his mind?"
So saying, the fair page at Wilfred glanced,
And seeing that he listened eagerly,
Smiled softly to himself and spoke again.
" 'Twould be a sorry wrong—a woeful wrong;
For of all evils that a man can do,
The worst forsooth is to deceive a maid."
Sir Wilfred laughed, grew pale, but answered not.
Anon a small brown hut rose on their view,
At which the page raised high one slender hand,
And pointing to it, said, " 'Tis there he lives.
Wilt thou not pause and rest thee here a space?
He is the soul of hospitality."
Sir Wilfred, pleased at such an easy way
Of finding out a knave to play the priest,
Having no doubt that gold would find the means
To reach that clouded brain and gain his ends,
Cried gayly, " Even so, I'll rest me here

Until the air grows cooler; we can reach
The castle ere the evening shadows fall.
Ride thou ahead and tell him that I come."
The page struck spurs to horse and flew ahead.
Sir Wilfred watched him as he lightly rode,
The reins close gathered in one slender hand,
The other set upon his shapely hip—
Saw how the graceful figure sat erect
And how the breeze bestirred the ruddy curls,
Marked that he rode without a trace of fear,
And muttered, "What a woman he would make!
Beshrew me, I am wondrous fond of him.
He stirs a hidden something in my heart
I had not known was there. Fair Isobel,
I fear my love for thee is on the wane.
Why not for once forbear to play the knave
And leave the pretty maid in peace—unharmed?
'Tis but a passing thought she hath for me,
And if I come not, she will deem me false,
Aye—even as I am—and then forget.
What was it that my page did say to me,

'Give up this life and struggle after good;
Be a brave knight proud of the shield he bears.
How gladly will I follow after thee.'
The words are fastened in my memory.
Were it a woman who had spoke those words—
A woman pure and good and brave and strong,
Whom I could worship with an honest love,
And who would lead me where I fain would go,
In those fair paths of virtue I have shunned—
Perchance I yet might save my blackened soul.
But all who favored me I cast aside,
While none I think have ever truly loved
Save one—sweet Rotha, of the long ago—
Whom the fair page brings often to my mind.
Come, Wilfred, play a goodly part for once;
Perchance 'twill wipe away a bit of guilt
And give thee footing in another world."
Meanwhile, within the hut the slender page
Spake eagerly unto the aged priest.
" I lured him here by falsehood, reverend sir;
I pray that it may be forgiven me.
Once here and with thy help he'll learn the truth,

That I—his page—am not his page, but wife;
That thou, dear Father, art a holy priest,
Who married us for better or for worse.
Worse it hath proved, but better it may be.
For I am certain that the time hath come
When he will gladly own me as his wife.
Such love as mine must conquer in the end.
True love, they say, can never lose its own.
Hast thou the dress?—'tis well, I'll don it now.
Thou knowest everything thou hast to say,
Then bless me for the task I undertake,
And pray a happy ending for us all."
So bowing low she left the reverend man,
Who met Sir Wilfred as he reached the door
And bade him enter, with a kindly smile.
Once entered, brought him good red wine and bread,
And after he had eaten, slowly spoke:
"Thou art Sir Wilfred Vaillard—we have met
One time before, although thou knowest it not.
Thy page hath told thee falsely, for I am
A priest who hath a mind as sound as thine.

Here are my orders; thou canst surely see
In very sooth I am a holy man."
So saying, on the table laid he down
His orders under Wilfred Vaillard's eye,
Who, reading, nodded with a puzzled air
And said, " I see my page hath played a jest.
I mind it not, for I confess to thee
For once I am resolved to play the fool
And do a good deed in the place of wrong.
I did intend to find some scurvy knave
Who'd play the priest to wed me to a maid,
So thought that thou wouldst ably fill the rôle.
How didst thou know I deemed thy mind unsound?
Oh, sure my page hath told thee of his jest.
Well—I have vowed to leave this maid in peace
Since I have really little love for her;
Therefore I care not if thou art a priest.
Tell me, kind Father, dost thou think one grain
Of good amid a thousand grains of bad
Will ever be remembered? "—and his voice
Lost all the merry swagger from its tone,
And Wilfred Vaillard spoke him like a child.

The priest made answer in a kindly voice,
" Aye, aye, my son; is not one grain of good
Better than none?—'twill be remembered sure.
Thou hast a leaning toward a better life,
Turn to it, as the flowers to the sun;
And as the sun's warmth opens all the gold
Within their hearts, so good will open thine.
Right glad am I thou wouldst not do this wrong.
Hast ever played so foul a trick before? "
Sir Wilfred nodded. " Long ago," he said;
" She was a slender child—a trusting babe.
Would I had left *her* to her maiden dreams
As now I have the Lady Isobel.
But, reverend Father "—here he gazèd long
Upon the priest before him—" thou didst say
That we had met before; I pray thee when,
For truly I have seen thy face before."
The priest made answer, " So one other said,
A lady—whom I wedded long ago,
I hear her step—she will enlighten thee."
And as Sir Wilfred started to his feet
The doorway framed a vision passing fair—

My Lady Isobel

A woman—regal in her slenderness,
With ruddy hair piled high upon her head,
A soft rose pink on either rounded cheek,
And love-light dancing in the faithful eyes.
A dead white gown enhanced her loveliness,
Clasped at the waist by a frail zone of gold.
She looked a woman of the world, and yet
A woman with a child-like heart and soul.
There hung a charm about her gracious self
Like to the scent of rose leaves dead and gone.
Sir Wilfred left the bud with petals closed,
But found the rose wide open to the sun.
For in her rightful garb he knew her now,
And crying " Rotha," fell before her feet.
She raised him gently with her small, white hands:
" Rise up, my husband; rise and kiss thy wife,
And bless the priest who wast a priest indeed,
Since I can truly call thee husband. Sweet,
Look up and see if I have art to please.
It is the woman Rotha—not the child.
And something tells me that thy love is mine."

Then, as his outstretched arms encircled her,
She lost the years of suffering in a kiss.

Upon the evening of that happy day
Sir Brian paced the walk with Isobel,
Marvelling at the silence of her mood.
She held a pink rose in her slender hands,
And as she walked, she plucked its leaves away,
Which one by one fell softly to the earth.
And Brian Guilleforde, walking by her side,
Thought, "As she holds the rose, she holds my heart,
And as she plucks the petals, plucks my strength.
How can I always keep my love from her?
How can I see her youth and joy depart
When she hath learnt Sir Wilfred's perfidy?"
Then Isobel paused swiftly, facing him
And saying, "Wilfred will return to-night,
And I must have good guidance; unto thee
I will confess what we had planned to do."
And with her face averted from his gaze
She told him of her promise at the tryst

Which now at leisure she repented of.
" Since thou hast told me what true love shouldst be,"
She said, " I know I do not truly love,
Nor doth Sir Wilfred truly care for me.
Therefore I will not wed him in such haste
Without my father's knowledge."—" It is well,"
Brian made answer with a lightened heart,
And suddenly the world seemed passing fair;
For though he might not hope to win her heart,
Sir Wilfred had it not, and she was saved
From suffering he would have kept her from.
And then a clatter came across the bridge
As over it three persons swiftly rode.
In the dim light they could not well be seen,
But Isobel cried quickly, " It is he,
And with him there must ride the priest and page.
Thou wilt stay near me, Brian "—in her fear
Of meeting Wilfred, she forgot the Sir—
And turned to him in child-like mute appeal,
Before which Brian's pulses beat like mad.
His name had never seemed so fair before,

Or she so witching in her helplessness.
But forcing back his passion, her small hands
He took within his own and thus replied:
" Dear child, fear not and all will yet be well.
Come with me to the hall—there thou wilt hear
Of something from the page." His tongue refused
To tell her of Sir Wilfred's villainy,
So left it to a woman's gentler art;
And with her hand still clasped in his, they went
Unto the hall and stood before the door.
One moment—while from out of Brian's clasp
She slowly drew the softness of her hand,
Raising her eyes in one long glance to his;
And as their glances met, in each sprang love.
She—with a woman's subtler knowledge—saw
And read the secret which he sought to hide.
But he, though stirred by something in her gaze,
Dared not to dream her eyes held love for him.
" I am the lady whom he loves," she thought,
And as she thought it read her heart aright,
And knew she prized that love above the world.

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And as she gained the knowledge of true love
She lost her fear of Wilfred—learned that love
And passion differ as the quiet stream
And raging mountain torrent; smilingly,
A child no longer but a woman grown,
Entered the hall, advanced, and paused amazed
As her clear eyes, first dazzled by the light,
Took in the picture that before her lay.
No other guests were gathered there that night.
Her father stood beside Sir Wilfred, while
Beside Sir Wilfred stood a very queen,
And near to her there sat an agèd priest.
But as she paused in wonder, Rotha came
Adown the hall, and clasping Isobel
Within her arms, said softly, " Dost not know
The page in woman's garments?—listen, child,
Unto the tale I have to tell to thee."
Then quietly and gently told her all,
Smoothing as best she could Sir Wilfred's part
Which he had played, and yet not sparing him,
Ending with how at last he woke to good
And that she now was his most honored wife.

"Thou dost not love him still?" she questioned
then;
And Isobel, whose maiden pride was touched
To think Sir Wilfred should deceive her so,
Dashed off an angry tear and answered, "Nay,
I know true love," then blushed and dropped her
head
Ere she could see the smile on Rotha's face.
Then came Sir Wilfred with an humble air
And knelt before the Lady Isobel.
"Wilt thou forgive me for the sorry part
I played toward thee?" he said. "Wilt be the friend
Of my dear wife; and if thou canst forgive,
My friend as well, for much I honor thee.
Thou and my wife art noble women both."
So Isobel, her anger quickly flown,
Answered, "Repentance is a goodly thing.
I do forgive thee, and will be the friend
Of this dear lady and thyself as well."
Then Wilfred said, "I told thy father all.
He, likewise, hath forgiven."—Isobel
On this ran forward to her father's arms:

" Thou knowest and thou chidest not," she cried.
" Dear father, wilt forgive a wilful maid? "
And slow her father answered, " Yea, my child,
'Twas much my fault; I guarded thee too close.
Now thou hast learnt the lesson and art safe,
I am not sorry that thou hast it learned,
And shall feel safe to let thee see the world."
Sir Brian from the others stood apart,
Right glad that all was ended sure and well,
Yet sad within his heart that he must ride
Upon the morrow from his lady love.
And as he sighed the Lady Rotha came,
Standing before him with a merry smile.
" Hath not all happened even as I said? "
She gayly cried. " Come, man, be not so sad."
Then growing grave, spoke earnestly and low:
" Sir Brian, dost remember when thou saidst
That Isobel loved Wilfred, that her heart
Would broken be when she did learn the truth—
Dost thou remember how I answered thee?
This did I say, that the awakening
Might prove more fair than ever was the dream.

True Love

'Twas even not a rude awakening,
So well thou played the part I left to thee.
Thou then didst ask me what I meant, and now
I'll tell thee—thou hast won thy lady love,
Taught her *true* love and given fairer dreams."
Brian grew pale beneath his swarthy skin
As he made answer, " Didst thou speak the truth—
Which I mistrust, for how could *she* love me?—
How could I ask her—beggar that I am?"
Rotha spoke sternly, " Thou hast goodly fame.
A bright untarnished shield no sin hath stained,
A loyal heart, a true and trusty blade.
All do not have so fair an heritage.
Let not thy pride be thy undoing now.
Think of her tears if thou shouldst ride away,
Thy love unspoken; thou wilt wreck her life.
She loves thee for thyself and not for gold;
Thy name and fame are dearer to her heart
Than coin and goodly lands could ever be."
She ceased as Lady Isobel drew near
And raised her eyes to Brian's—faithful eyes
That knew so much of love and pled its cause.

They searched his face and found their answer there;
Smiled into his—and then she moved away,
Leaving the two together.—Isobel
Stood silently, but Brian spoke in haste,
As though he feared his courage would take flight:
"Come to thy garden—I would speak with thee."
And Isobel for answer led the way.
It was as fair a night as that before
When she had met Sir Wilfred, save the moon
Rode in resplendent fulness high above.
There was a silence and a solemn peace
Charged with the knowledge of forthcoming bliss;
Oh, sure there never was so fair a night!
She trembled slightly as he told his love
In a few words—fit symbols of the man.
"I love thee, Isobel," he whispered low—
"Love thee with all my heart and all my soul.
I have no offering to bring to thee
Save an untarnished shield—a strong right arm
To guard thee from the buffets of the world;
My honor and the name my father bore—

These are my treasures, they are all my wealth."
Then Isobel came close and laid her arms
About his neck and pressed her face to his,
As full of joy he clasped her to his heart.
" I am not worthy of thy love," she breathed,
And paused to feel his kisses on her lips.
" But Brian, ah, I love thee, heart of mine.
The wealth thou hast is greater than all gold."
She drew herself away and softly held
His face between her hands.—" Our motto, dear,
Shall be ' True Love,' my lover and my knight.
Close fast thine eyes; " and then as he obeyed,
Feeling her kiss fall softly on his lips,
Brian amid the tumult of his joy
Knew he had *won the Lady Isobel.*

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